

COMMENTARY

“Mapping New Methodological Approaches to Girls’ Media Studies: Reflections from the Field”

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Over the past two decades, girls’ media studies has developed from a marginalized research interest into an innovative subfield exploring the relationship between girls and media cultures. As girls become increasingly visible within the production, reception, and distribution of cinema, television, and new media, girls’ media studies scholars have responded by employing a diverse range of methodological approaches, including discursive and aesthetic analysis, ethnographic interviews, industrial analysis, historiography, and community engagement.

While this subfield is quite interdisciplinary and international, there have been few explorations of its various methodological approaches. Recognizing the growing significance of media within girls’ cultures—and vice versa—we need to create spaces for open dialogue about how researching girlhood can contribute to the development of media studies at large. At the 2015 Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) Annual Conference we participated in a workshop that aimed to produce this intellectual space by bringing together a diverse group of girls’ media studies scholars to reflect on the various methodologies currently being employed in the subfield and to consider what new methodological approaches might be needed as our field grows.

At the workshop we grappled with several questions that provide context for our discussion below: How have girls’ studies researchers reconfigured approaches to media

studies? How might traditional methods, such as narrative analysis, be refreshed through an application to new media texts and girls' media practices circulating globally? How do we study representations of girlhood and girls' uses of media across platforms? In what ways can we analyze girls' roles as celebrities, media producers, and audiences within converged media industries? How might historical research help us understand contemporary girls' media cultures? And what methodological approaches remain underutilized but potentially useful in girls' media studies research?

With the inaugural International Girls' Studies Association Conference being held at the University of East Anglia in April 2016, we believe that a more rigorous analysis of girls' media studies methodologies is particularly timely and necessary. In this Review and Commentary article we use our SCMS workshop as a springboard to clarify key methodological themes, debates, and questions that we see shaping contemporary girls' media studies. The comments below then serve as a starting point for what we hope will be an ongoing conversation amongst girls' media scholars.

Rethinking Film and Media Studies: Genre, Marginal Subjects and Industry

We want to begin by considering the ways in which research on girls has strengthened and transformed the field of media studies over the last 25 years. For example, by addressing the kinds of media female youth use and produce, girls' media studies scholars redefine the texts that matter. In *Girls Make Media*, Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) shows that pre-digital amateur media production includes girls' diaries, letters, and photographs. Here, Kearney not only includes what might be assumed to be typical girls' texts—diaries and letters—and thereby expands the reach of media studies, but she also rewrites media history by insisting on including girls' photography. Kyra

Gaunt (2006) also redefines and expands media authorship and our understanding of the texts that matter when she argues that hip-hop—originally associated with Black male artists—can be traced to the rhymes and rhythms Black girls create during jump rope play. Thus, she argues, hip-hop would not exist without Black girls’ musical production. Also redefining what counts as media production, Amy Hasinoff (2015) argues that, despite being an object of moral panic in contemporary mass media, sexting can more profitably be understood as a form of girls’ media production and self-expression.

Other girls’ studies scholars call for new ways of approaching the mediascape. As Sarah Projansky (2014) argues, we can see girls of color and queer girls throughout high profile media—when we look for them—and girls’ studies offers an opportunity to develop more nuanced understandings of these representations. In this context, Rebecca Wanzo (2009) calls for analyses that seek to “circumvent[] . . . whiteness” (p. 4), and Angharad Valdivia (2008) documents how frequently Latina girls appear in popular children’s media despite assumptions to the contrary. Similarly, Susan Driver (2007) argues against reifying the dominant by focusing one’s critical attention there, and her analyses of both explicit and implicit representations of queer girls, as well as the complex ways queer girls use media, illustrate this approach. Jessalynn Keller’s (2012; 2015) research also utilizes this strategy, drawing attention to the ways in which girls are engaging in feminist activism using digital media platforms, challenging hegemonic representations of girls as apolitical and not interested in feminism. Collectively, then, this girls’ studies research calls for film and media studies scholars to use their analyses to shift marginalization and give visibility to a variety of girlhoods.

Girls' studies scholars have also redefined canonical aspects of film and media studies, including concepts such as genre, the star system, and the media franchise. In terms of genre, Kirsten Pike (2015a) reads Disney's *Witch Mountain* films not as children's films but rather as a hybrid genre of horror children's films, an argument she bases on the way the films represent girls' sexuality in the context of "the women's liberation era." Also focusing on the 1970s with Tatum O'Neal as a case study, Projansky (2014a) argues that the girl celebrity epitomizes the star system, particularly in terms of her hyper-whiteness and the scandal of her status as a sexualized object of display.

The figure of the girl elucidates key aspects of the media industry in more recent media texts as well. Pointing to the emergence of blockbuster girl film franchises since 2008—including *Twilight*, the Disney Princess Films, and *Hunger Games* as three of the top-earning film franchises of all time—Projansky (2014b) suggests that the structure of the film franchise may be changing. Morgan Blue also uses a media-industrial frame to uncover the variety of labors required of Disney Channel's girl performers. As an integral part of the media-industrial complex, for instance, stardom functions in particular ways within girl-driven franchises. Complicating constructions of the media franchise that reify narrative or character and may pay less attention to the role of the star, Blue argues that the girl performer, rather than her character or fictional narrative, becomes the franchiseable element for the Disney Channel (Blue, forthcoming).

Studying the ways in which Disney employs girl performers for diversification can also complicate accepted thinking regarding the merchandising associated with media franchises. Specifically, Blue analyzes how Disney Channel's fashion lines for girls add a wrinkle to accepted constructions of the 'toy or t-shirt' paratext in media studies

scholarship (Blue, 2013). The fashion paratext asks girls not only to play with elements of the story in their daily lives, but also to develop their identities through acts of daily dress and consumerism. Again, each of these examples demonstrates how critical attention to girls provides a deeper understanding of a changing media industry and celebrity culture.

Our point in discussing how girls' studies has redefined some aspects of media studies—including the texts that matter, marginalization within the mediascape, the genre of children's media, the definition of the star system, and the structure of the contemporary media franchise—is not that girls' studies is the only approach that can make these kinds of changes. Rather, our point is that by paying attention to girls' studies scholarship the broader field of media studies can expand on this productive re-thinking.

Considering Girls' Media History

While girls' media studies scholars are engaging in innovative methodologies that are transforming the field of media studies, there remains opportunity to expand our toolbox. For example, we'd like to encourage more historical scholarship on girls' media cultures. There is a dearth of this type of research; most studies in our field are focused on the present. This situation limits our understanding of not only previous periods of girls' media, but our current one as well since we do not have opportunities for comparison that might reveal points of continuity and transformation. Thus, we are missing the opportunity to understand the *longue durée* of girls' media culture. Here we provide some suggestions for girls' media historiography to help jump-start more work in this area.

First, numerous historical research projects on girls' media culture are possible now that we have greater access to archival materials due to digitalization. A considerable amount of research on the 1920s, '30s, and '40s has been conducted (Nash, 2005; Scheiner, 2000; Schrum, 2004), yet little work exists on other periods. By delving further into those, we will not only expand girls' media studies, but also complicate what is known about media culture at large by taking a girl-centered approach.

Second, we want to advocate Cultural Studies' integrated approach for girls' media historians. By analyzing media texts alongside their production and/or reception we can explore more fully the complexities of media culture while opening up other avenues for further research. Kristen Hatch's (2015) book on Shirley Temple is exemplary in challenging current notions of this star's performances of girlhood by contextualizing them via earlier theories of childhood and forms of spectatorship, as well as industry trends. When we have the opportunity, girls' media historians should also interview the subjects of their studies, encouraging such individuals to be collaborators in the research process. Time is of the essence here, as many early producers and consumers of girls' media are no longer with us.

Third, girls' media historians need to be creative and open-minded. As an example, consider the development of Kearney's (2004) article, "Recycling Judy and Corliss." That project began by happenstance while she was writing an encyclopedia entry on teen television and learned that two girl-centered comic book series from the 1940s—*A Date with Judy* and *Meet Corliss Archer*—were produced for radio and television also. Fascinated, Kearney interviewed *Judy*'s creator, Aleen Leslie, who did not know the whereabouts of her scripts and production notes. Fortunately, an online

search showed that F. Hugh Herbert's *Corliss* files are located at the American Heritage Center. While Kearney was conducting research there, an archivist encouraged her to examine their card catalog since their digital files were not yet up-to-date. She did and discovered the Center has eleven boxes of Leslie's materials.

Nonetheless, Kearney found only a few recordings of *A Date with Judy* and *Meet Corliss Archer*, which posed a problem for textual analysis. As she did more research, however, an unexpected story revealed itself: *Judy* and *Corliss* are among the earliest transmedial properties, having been produced in every entertainment form then available, including film and theatre. Moreover, these properties' transmediality was not the result of profit-driven media conglomerates (as it would be today), but of entrepreneurial writers, who repeatedly recycled their work on their own to support their families. If serendipity hadn't led Kearney to *A Date with Judy* and *Meet Corliss Archer* and their creators, she would not have written about them, and we would know less not only about mid-twentieth-century girls' media but also about screenwriters of that period and their strategies for economic survival. Girl-centered media historiography is an adventure that can transform girls' studies and media studies. Why *not* be a girls' media historian?

Girls as Participants and Research Collaborators

Ethnographic research is another method we would like to see employed more rigorously in girls' media studies research; indeed, while it is popular in disciplines such as education and sociology, ethnography continues to remain underutilized in our field. Yet we believe that it offers key insights into the gendered meanings and cultural impact of girls' media in particular local contexts and historical moments.

For example, Pike describes how her experience teaching girls' media studies at Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) allowed her to discover the popularity of Disney princess culture amongst her college-aged students, while also realizing how little is known about the reception of girls' media in the Arab world. Ultimately, conversations in class, combined with her interest in taking up calls by feminist scholars to do more research *with* girls (Hains, 2012a; Kearney, 2011), inspired Pike to design a study where she could learn from Arab female college students about their experiences with princess-themed media. While this project (which included IRB-approved interviews with fourteen students) shed light on Arab girls' varied negotiations with identity politics in both local and global media, perhaps even more interesting was Pike's finding that the college students used Disney films as inspiration for creating new princess-themed narratives more in line with their gendered concerns (Pike, 2015b). Given that Arab girls' insights challenged popular discourses that construct girls as passive, vulnerable, and/or uncritical recipients of media messages, this study revealed how interviewing girls can lead to unexpected yet valuable discoveries.

Interviewing girls and collaborating with girls on research projects are both beneficial for scholars who wish to know more about the politics and practices of girls who grew up in a cultural context that is different from their own. But even more important is how girls bring new artifacts, ideas, and questions to the research process. This was again illuminated in Pike's current research collaborating with 15 female NU-Q students and five faculty members on a research project exploring how Qatari women's participation in *majalis al-hareem* (women's gatherings) shape their social, cultural, and political engagement(s) in the broader public sphere. While their project is designed to

help undergraduates gain practical research experience and skills, Pike has learned as much, if not more, from the girls involved, who have been instrumental in many ways—from shaping informed consent documents, to providing access to private domestic spaces where Qatari women gather to talk, to shooting documentary footage and conducting ethnographic fieldwork in those spaces.

Keller has used similar collaborative ethnographic methods in her research into girls' feminist digital cultures. In her study of feminist girl bloggers, Keller (2015) employed what she describes as an “online focus group blog” that served as a digital space where her geographically dispersed participants could talk to one another, ask questions of each other, and ask Keller questions as well. By participating in this way, the teenage bloggers helped to shape the direction of the research in unanticipated ways, such as by raising topics that Keller may not have asked and engaging in productive dialogue with one another. These conversations served as rich data that helped Keller to better understand the everyday lives of her participants, while also disrupting the power dynamic inherent in the researcher/participant relationship where the power to ask questions usually belongs to the researcher.

Despite recent, valuable contributions to girls' media studies that combine ethnographic research with feminist criticism (Hains 2012b; Keller 2015; Pike 2015b; Projansky 2014; Zaslow 2009), more work needs to be done in this area. Not only can interviewing and collaborating with girls help us better understand the nuances and complexities of girls' negotiations with local and global media culture and politics, but doing so is also extremely inspiring, rewarding, and fun.

Researching Girls' Media Studies into the (Neoliberal?) Future

The growth of girls' media studies as a field coincides with university administrators' and government legislators' calls for curricula that deliver marketable skills and return on tuition dollars. It also coincides with tenure and funding decisions increasingly influenced by quantification made possible by data mining technology and provided by new for-profit companies such as Academic Analytics LLC (2015) that promise to deliver "objective" information about scholarly output. These neoliberal conditions present a challenge for girls' studies, which, like much social justice scholarship, incorporates community-engaged research and appears in newer and therefore less established journals. Further, girls' studies is invested in social subjects—girls—who sometimes represent, ironically, both the epitome of the flexible neoliberal subject (Harris, 2004) and youthful pre-citizens lacking professional marketability.

Despite, but also because of, these challenges, we suggest that engaging with girls' studies is one way to challenge both capitalist interests and traditionalism-shrouded-as-objectivity in academia. As discussed above, girls' studies grants opportunities for collaboration between scholars and with girls, challenging the individualism and competition promoted within neoliberal institutions. For example, last year Keller engaged in a team-research project about feminist clubs in London high schools and recently presented findings from this research with one of the teenage feminist participants. Scholars' collaboration with girls as speakers at academic events can produce exciting and insightful conversation, as well as intergenerational dialogue that is essential for social justice activism that calls into question the instrumental logic of neoliberal knowledge production. While these practices certainly present logistical

challenges (e.g., chaperoning underage girls at speaking events and requiring parental permissions for participation in research), girls' ability to speak of their own experiences in academic settings can challenge hierarchies of knowledge and voice, contribute to girls' self-confidence, and highlight their identities as critical thinkers and active citizens.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize the need to remain attentive to questions of “what is a girl?” and “what is girlhood?”—inquiries that should lead girls' media scholars to reconsider our preconceived notions about the subjects of our research and about identity more broadly. While several scholars have challenged the centrality of white, middle-class, straight, adolescent girlhood in our field via explorations of female youths' diversity, few studies have troubled the idea of “girl” from a gender perspective. Girls' media scholars could disrupt the reproduction of normative girlhood in our field by relying more on queer theories of gender and by exploring boys' relationships to girls' media culture (Driver, 2007). By continually problematizing our object of study, girls' media studies will remain not only relevant, but at the forefront of research into media cultures.

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